

Retrofitting in a personal way

Tania Carregha and **Leonie Taylor** explain why local government is uniquely placed to support the green housing shift

To reach the UK's goal of net zero carbon emissions by 2050, we must 'retrofit' around 29 million homes. That means making structural and technological adaptations to people's homes, improving their energy efficiency and reducing carbon emissions.

It is a huge task. But as our domestic residences are currently responsible for 20% of national emissions, and 32% in London alone, reducing their reliance on fossil fuels such as coal and gas is critical.

This is not just a carbon-cutting challenge, it is also a social one.

The UK has some of the oldest housing stock in Europe, with millions of people living in homes that are, variously, cold, damp, warm, stuffy, expensive to heat, expensive to cool – and people's health, wellbeing and comfort is suffering as a result.

Yet, retrofit is not being taken up at the pace or scale needed to meet 2050 targets.

This is because, as well as needing technical solutions, retrofit is a deeply personal process. It involves residents letting strangers into their home,

navigating disruption and making long-term decisions about unfamiliar technologies.

Local government has a critical role to play in overcoming these challenges as councils are close to their communities, know their housing stock and can tailor retrofit to local need.

Practical and resident-led

At The Young Foundation, we have spent the last year working with residents to understand the barriers to uptake of retrofit measures and programmes.

Our new report and toolkit, *A just transition in London's retrofits*, developed through participatory research, sets out practical, resident-led recommendations for a just and fair transition in retrofit – one that recognises and responds to social and demographic realities.

It focuses particularly on the experiences of people whose identities intersect with protected characteristics – including age, ethnicity and culture, disability, gender and sex.

The research found that one-size-fits-all

programmes, designed around the 'average consumer', often fail to recognise the living realities that shape decision-making – from individuals' health concerns and past traumas, to broader mistrust of contractors, and communication barriers.

Greater sensitivity, flexibility and awareness are required, and we have seen that when retrofit programmes are designed around those with higher needs, everyone benefits.

This is where local government can lead, addressing local needs by embedding social understanding into retrofit delivery.

Steps to success

Driving this vital change, the retrofit toolkit urges councils to make key shifts in approach.

1) Consider the 'soft skills' of delivery providers and local supply chains alongside technical requirements.

Retrofit providers with technical expertise also need 'soft skills' to work with residents in ways that are empathetic and speak to their needs.

Retrofit ambitions will not be met at the pace required unless it works for people. Local government is uniquely placed to make that happen

This extends beyond relational skills, towards the territory of 'reasonable adjustments' – which requires awareness of, and sensitivity towards, a range of needs, and a disposition to work flexibly around them.

2) Ensure councils' monitoring and evaluation of retrofit programmes captures joined-up outcomes.

Retrofit data often focuses narrowly on energy performance, based on 'average' use, missing key aspects of living experience. This overlooks broader

Ben McCallan explains how Surrey CC has helped establish a community energy sector by building strong relationships with residents and collaborating with established organisations

Over the last three years, Surrey CC has been taking great strides in rolling out community energy projects across the county.

We are committed to continuing with further community energy projects as they are a key tool to help our residents reduce their energy bills, keep their homes warm and free of damp and mould, while also decarbonising our energy mix and creating local jobs in a fast-growing sector.

At its core, community energy is designed to bring local people together to deliver community-led and owned renewable energy projects, as well as to advise communities on how they can be more energy efficient.

Our community energy journey has been significantly supported by Community Energy Pathways (CEP), a not-for-profit social enterprise dedicated

Surrey's journey towards a climate resilient future

to establishing and expanding community energy groups.

These groups are instrumental in helping communities employ energy sources that are less susceptible to price fluctuations while reducing their energy bills. Furthermore, they empower local communities to have greater control over their energy mix.

To establish these groups CEP's support programme provides a structured approach to developing community energy networks, aligning with our climate change strategy and SCC's strategic priority of 'Surrey's Greener Future', which we aim to deliver in an ambitious and fair way under the council's banner of 'No One Left Behind'. By fostering collaboration between various stakeholders, CEP has enabled us to create a robust framework for community energy projects.

We have now supported the establishment of several community energy groups across Surrey. We continue to support these groups by



providing guidance on governance, skills development and funding, enabling them to undertake a variety of projects aimed

at reducing energy consumption and promoting renewable energy sources.

One such group is Zero Carbon



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benefits such as safer, more comfortable homes, improved health outcomes – both physically and mentally – and lower energy bills.

It also fails to respond to local needs, concerns and geographies. A more holistic approach to measuring retrofit outcomes enables better resident engagement,

builds trust and helps to identify and address shared challenges.

3) Align retrofit with broader council strategy and delivery.

Local councils can play a key role in supporting a more holistic approach to domestic retrofit by joining up internal thinking and activity in the local community.

This involves equipping colleagues – particularly those in public health, safer housing, and maintenance and repairs – with a baseline level of retrofit understanding so they can socialise and signpost relevant green upgrade schemes and retrofit programmes in their on-the-ground interactions with residents.

Retrofit ambitions will not be met at the pace required unless it works for people. Local government is uniquely placed to make that happen.

This is a critical moment, with local and national government accelerating efforts to retrofit housing stock across the UK: delays now risk widening inequalities and entrenching poor housing for those least able to bear it.

Addressing inequalities

With the right tools, resources and partnerships, councils can lead a just transition – improving homes, reducing emissions and protecting the most vulnerable.

That is why we are working with London Councils, supporting them to collaborate with social housing providers, sharing best practice and lessons learned, and designing resources informed by this.

It is an approach all councils and regions would benefit from, working with local knowledge to help achieve a truly resident-first approach to retrofit that suits diverse places, communities and needs. ▶

Tania Carregha and Leonie Taylor are senior researchers at The Young Foundation

cleaner energy future

Guildford (ZCG), which I helped set up in 2021. ZCG, working with partners like Energy Action Redhill and Reigate and Circular Dorking, is more focused on improving energy efficiency by advising residents how they can be smarter with their energy without impacting their day-to-day lives.

ZCG is now also home to Surrey's Home Energy Advice Team, which has supported more than 2,000 Surrey households with free home energy visits and more than £600,000 worth of free thermal imaging in the last 18 months.

The journey towards a cleaner and more energy secure future is a challenging yet rewarding endeavour. Our collaboration with CEP has been instrumental in accelerating this journey.

By integrating community energy into our local authority strategies, we have been able to create a more resilient and sustainable energy system.

One of the reasons we are committed to community energy projects is because they enjoy significant public support, with

polling by Common Wealth revealing that 62% of the public would support a community-owned renewable energy project in their area, compared with 40% for a privately-owned project.

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This support is crucial as it fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among residents, encouraging them to actively participate in the transition to renewable energy.

For other councils interested in rolling out community energy projects, I cannot overstate the importance of engaging local communities.

Building strong relationships with residents and involving them in decision-making ensures their needs and concerns are addressed. This helps bring them on the journey with us.

Collaborating with established community energy organisations like CEP can provide invaluable support in setting up and managing community energy projects.

Identifying potential funding sources and partners, whether it be through local authority collaborations, private sector companies, or government grants, can provide the necessary financial support to kick-start projects.

Furthermore, with local authorities having already stretched budgets, putting assurance in community energy groups as trusted delivery partners is key to success.

Investing in training and capacity building for community energy groups is also crucial.

Providing groups with the skills and knowledge needed to manage projects effectively will ensure long-term success.

Raising awareness about the benefits of community energy through public campaigns and educational initiatives can help garner public support. Highlighting success stories and the positive impact on energy bills and carbon emissions

can inspire more communities to get involved.

Finally, integrating community energy into local authority climate action plans and strategies provides a clear framework for action and facilitates co-ordination among different stakeholders.

This integration will help create a more resilient and sustainable energy system that benefits both the environment and the community. This is a key reason we worked with CEP to develop and mentor the generation-focused group, Surrey Community Energy.

The rollout of community energy projects in Surrey has been a transformative journey, significantly advancing our efforts towards a cleaner energy future.

Through the support of CEP and the active participation of our residents, we have created a sustainable and resilient energy system that benefits both the environment and the community.

Other councils embarking on a similar path towards a greener future ought to seriously consider how community energy can support them on their journey. ▶

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